

Category H, March 19, 2002, Herald Union

Rivera returns with DoD boxing title

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In just one year she went from being a complete unknown to an armed forces champion.

Theola Rivera literally battled her way to the top of the U.S. military boxing food chain to win the Armed Forces Boxing Championship at Camp Lajuene, N.C., in February. Boxing out of her 132-pound weight class against a Marine opponent in the 139-pound weight class, Rivera managed to out pound the woman leatherneck 17-3.

"She was in a higher weight class than me, she was a lot taller than me, she had the reach on me - so I thought that would be challenging," said Rivera.

"She weighed in at 139, but you know that when you weigh in you have to make your weight. But afterwards you can eat more and be at your normal weight. So she probably weighed more than 139. I'm guessing she was about five-nine in height and I'm five-four," she said. "But I knew I could do it. I had good confidence. I went in there and, yeah, I was successful."

Rivera knows, however, that success is not handed to you. You have to work for it and work for it she did. Rivera managed to obtain world class athlete status while balancing her family life and career. Off-duty she's a mom to her three-year-old son Micholas and a wife to her husband Staff Sgt. Jose Rivera of Headquarters, Headquarters Company, 1-35 Armor. Her own fulltime military career is that of a 63 Bravo Lightwheel Mechanic with Delta Company, 123rd Main Support Battalion. Although she has fully dedicated herself to her sport, Rivera staunchly proclaims, "Mission first, above all."

In spite of all her good intentions, training is often a challenge. Rivera has to grab the opportunity to train when she can. Even if it means jumping rope and shadow boxing in the middle of the night while deployed to Grafenwöhr.

"I'm lucky, though," said Rivera. "My chain of command really supports me. When I came back (After winning the Armed Forces championship) and I went to Dexheim, they had a big banner up at the gate when I came in. I was awarded an Army Achievement Medal for what I had accomplished. They had a ceremony for me complete with cake, flowers and a formation. That's support right there. That meant a lot. Everybody was congratulating me. They were like, proud," she said.

With championships at All Army and Armed Forces under her belt, Rivera is now setting her sights on greater challenges. Her immediate goal is to get assigned to Fort Carson and the World Class Athlete Program.

Once assigned to WCAP, Rivera will be able to train at a regular boxing camp and prepare for the Women's National Competition scheduled for July.

"I'm also looking at six years down the road, to 2008. That's when they're projecting that female boxing will be an Olympic sport. That's what I'm looking forward to. That's my main goal right there. And my husband supports me, that's the main thing," she said.

"I started boxing while my husband was in Kosovo," she said. "Before he left, I went to the gym a few times but I wasn't into it. Also, before he left we were talking about having a second child. Then, while he's gone he finds out that I want to box, that I found a new sport and that I want to hold off on having more children and making my family bigger. That was the hardest thing for him to grasp but once we talked that through, he was good," she said.

Rivera took up boxing along with two other women from her unit. At that time, women were just starting to make their presence known in the USAREUR boxing scene. She could not have known that just one year later she would rocket to the top and claim the championship title in her weight class. She humbly admits that back then, equal opportunity to compete was the only goal she and her two companions had set. "My ambition back then was for females to be allowed to compete in All Army," she said. Because women boxers were just beginning to

spread their wings in USAREUR, every time that Rivera and her companions competed, they made history. It was a first everywhere they went. There crowning moment came when all three won the USAREUR championships in their respective weight classes.

"I think that opened up some eyes," she said.

Boxing has also added a somewhat foreseen challenge to Rivera's life. Not only does she have to contend with competing in a traditionally male-dominated sport, There's also the stigma that if you're a woman boxer you must have some feminine shortcomings.

While having her hands wrapped for a match at the Armed Forces competition, the assistant eyed her painted fingernails and asked, "You box?"

"Yeah," she said.

"What about your fingernails?"

"You know, just because I paint my nails and look feminine when I'm not boxing doesn't mean I can't box. I said to him, you probably don't know I'm a mechanic either.

The naive ringside assistant would probably have more difficulty accepting her as a mechanic than a boxer.

"When I get under the trucks, the grease falls in my eyes, my mascara is everywhere, my hair is everywhere and I don't care."

Rivera is constantly phasing from Rivera the boxer, to Rivera the soldier, to Rivera the woman and civilian.

"I'm like totally different people. When I'm in civilian clothes, my hair is down and I dress nice. When I'm at work my makeup and my hair gets messed up I don't care. When I'm in the ring I don't wear makeup and hair spray.

"So they can't judge me because I look feminine when I'm not in the ring and not in the motor pool. But I thought it was funny that he was shocked that my fingernails were painted. You can be a girl and box," she said.

And one year later, after countless workout sessions at the Hall of Champions with her son always at her side, the support of her husband and her chain of command, Baumholder has a new champion.

"That blows people's mind when they ask me how long I've been doing it and I say a year. You know, I don't realize how well I've done until I see peoples' reactions when I tell them I've only been doing it for a year. I didn't realize what an accomplishment it was. So, anybody can do it. You just gotta' put your heart into it," she said.